

Diachronic Diversity in Classical Biblical Hebrew

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10. נַעַר VERSUS נַעֲרָה WITH FEMININE SINGULAR REFERENT

In most manifestations of ancient Hebrew, nouns with the root נַעַר and the basic meaning ‘young male’ and ‘young female’ are morphologically distinguished, e.g., Tiberian נַעַר and נַעֲרָה, the feminine bearing a dedicated feminine singular suffix. In the case of biblical material, this is true of the pronunciation component of the aforementioned Tiberian Masoretic tradition, the combined Samaritan written and pronunciation tradition, and BDSS material. Beyond biblical sources, the same distinction is made in QH, Ben Sira, and RH.

1.0. Dissonance in the Tiberian Torah

Partially exceptional in this connection is the written component of the Tiberian Masoretic tradition. While throughout the Prophets and the Writings—in CBH and LBH alike—the Tiberian written and reading components agree on the morphologically distinct feminine singular form נַעֲרָה, the written component of the Masoretic Pentateuch represents an outlier. Here, in 34 of the 35 instances where the tradition’s pronunciation component prescribes reading נַעֲרָה, the written component is נַעַר.¹

¹ The information pertinent to MT is based on L. Notably, however, the tradition as reflected in L is confirmed by Talmudic discussions of the lone case of *plene* נַעֲרָה in Deut. 22.19 (y. Ketubbot 3.9 || y. Sanhedrin 7.11; b. Ketubbot 40b), over which considerable exegetical energy was expended.

Cases of FS נָעַר (ה) are limited to three loci in the Pentateuch: Gen. 24; 34; Deut. 22. In the eight relevant cases in Genesis,² the written form נָעַר is simply vocalised with a final \bar{a} , as נָעַרְ, with no explicit *ketiv-qere* guidance. From the perspective of its defective ending, i.e., lacking a final *mater heh*, it is a case of implicit *qere perpetuum*.

In 26 of the remaining 27 cases in the Torah, all in Deut. 22,³ readers are explicitly instructed via the *ketiv-qere* mechanism—consisting of the consonant-vowel combination נָעַרְ within the main text and an accompanying marginal note with the consonants נָעַרָה—to pronounce vowel-final נָעַרָה instead of the pronunciation one might naturally associate with written נָעַר, i.e., נָעַרְ.

In just one instance in the Torah, the orthographic and pronunciation components of the tradition agree on morphologically feminine singular הַנְּעִיָּה ‘the young woman’ (Deut. 22.19). The uniqueness of this form within the Pentateuch receives overt acknowledgement in the Masoretic paratext via the marginal note לֹא מִלּוֹ בְּתוּרָה = לֹא מִלּוֹ בְּתוּרָה ‘no other *plene* (spelling) in the Torah’.

The distribution of the various forms is not obviously a function of putative source, as all cases in Genesis belong to J, while all those in Deuteronomy belong to the Law Code (‘Other’, according to Friedman 1989, 246–55).

² Gen. 24.14 (J), 16 (J), 28 (J), 55 (J), 57 (J); 34.3 (J), 3 (J), 12 (J).

³ Deut. 22.15 (Other), 15 (Other), 16 (Other), 20 (Other), 21 (Other), 23 (Other), 24 (Other), 25 (Other), 26 (Other), 26 (Other), 27 (Other), 28 (Other), 29 (Other).

2.0. Explanations

Two issues require clarification: first, the apparent dissonance between the written and vocalic components of the Tiberian Torah manifest in mismatched consonant-final spellings and vowel-final realisations; second, the resulting disparity between the Tiberian Torah, evincing the aforementioned dissonance, and the rest of the Tiberian Bible, where the written and reading components of the tradition are in agreement, and other ancient Hebrew sources. There are two basic approaches: orthographic and linguistic.

2.1. Orthography

One possibility is that the distinctions in question are purely orthographic, not linguistic, in nature. On this argument, Tiberian BH consistently reflects morphologically distinct masculine singular and feminine singular forms, but in most cases in the Torah the feminine singular is written with defective vowel-final orthography. Feminine singular נֶעֶר is thus, it is argued, a case of *qere perpetuum* akin to other instances of final \bar{a} with no accompanying *mater heh*, thus resembling the minority 2/3FPL ending נֶ- (more commonly נָה- , but see above, ch. 9) and the majority 2MS endings ךֶ- and תֶ- (less commonly כָה- and תָה-) (GKC §17c; cf. Hornkohl 2023, 101–44). From the narrow perspective of the Torah, the spelling נֶעֶר for a feminine singular referent cannot be considered anomalous, as this is by far the dominant spelling throughout the corpus.

If the dominant feminine singular written form נֶעֶר in the Masoretic Torah is to be chalked up to spelling convention, the distinction between the Torah, on the one hand, and the Prophets

and Writings, on the other, is also purely orthographic. The Torah might preserve archaic orthography, whereas the Prophets and Writings show more standard vowel-final orthography. Such spelling trends might have some diachronic significance, with the defective orthography considered characteristic of early texts and the *plene* of later texts, but it is important to acknowledge the possibility of secondary processes having profoundly blurred original spelling practices. For example, while it seems likely that the *plene* spelling of cases of נָעִרָה in Esther are authentic, perhaps cases in Judges were once spelled נָעִר and only secondarily standardised in conformity with late spelling practices. By the same token, perhaps early cases of Pentateuchal נָעִר with feminine singular reference were preserved, while certain cases of נָעִרָה in the Torah were secondarily shortened under the influence of the majority form נָעִר there—though the existence of a lone *plene* form נָעִרָה in the Torah at Deut. 22.19 seems to militate against the notion of wholesale secondary harmonisation in the Tiberian written component of the Pentateuch.

Summing up the potential diachronic significance of the orthographic explanation, a plausible hypothesis is that the written component of the Masoretic Torah reflects archaic spelling conventions. While these conventions may also have been operative in extra-Pentateuchal CBH texts, they have been superseded by the more standard spelling with final *mater heh*, probably due to secondary scribal intervention. If CBH texts beyond the Torah ever knew the defective vowel-final orthography, the difference between them and the Torah, i.e., preservation of the defective vowel-final orthography in the Torah and secondary imposition

of the standard *plene* vowel-final orthography elsewhere in CBH, is probably due to the relatively early literary unification of the Torah and to special reverence, whereby its orthography became fixed earlier than that of the rest of BH, including other CBH material.

Notwithstanding what has been said, a compelling argument against a fundamentally orthographic explanation for נער with a feminine singular referent in the Torah lies precisely in its oddness. From the broader perspective of the entire Masoretic Bible, as well as other biblical traditions and extrabiblical ancient Hebrew sources, the defective spelling of the \bar{a} suffix in any feminine singular form is anomalous in the extreme. Why are there not more feminine substantives with defective \bar{a} suffixes?

2.2. Language

A more reasonable proposal is that the distinction between the Tiberian Torah's written form נער for a feminine singular referent and נערה elsewhere in Tiberian BH, and in every other ancient Hebrew tradition and source, is linguistic in character. If so, then the written and reading components of the Tiberian biblical tradition in the Torah reflect slightly dissonant manifestations of Hebrew.

The basic idea here is that the Tiberian Torah's written component preserves a form of ancient Hebrew with an epicene lexeme נער in the gender-neutral sense of 'young person'. The usage is often compared to Greek $\delta \pi α ῖ ς$ 'the child (M)' versus $ἡ \pi α ῖ ς$ 'the child (F)' (cf. English *baby*, *infant*, *child*, *adolescent*, *youth*, *teenager*). While many BH terms for pre-adults have distinct

masculine and feminine forms, many (apparently) do not, employing unmarked morphology generally associated with masculine gender, e.g., זֶרַע ‘seed’, גָּמול ‘weaned’, יוֹנֵק ‘nursing child’, עוֹל ‘nursing child’, עוֹלָל ‘child’, עוֹלָל ‘child’, וְלֵד ‘child’, טף ‘children’. Perhaps ancient Hebrew נֶעַר was also early on a member of this morphologically ungendered category and only later developed distinct feminine singular morphology (Gesenius 1815, 162; Elitzur 2018a, 84–86).

Against the proposal of an epicene understanding of נֶעַר, one might raise the matter of feminine morphosyntactic agreement. In nearly every case of consonantal נֶעַר where the referent is feminine, there obtains feminine agreement with a finite verbal form, participle, adjective, or pronoun. Clearly, even if נֶעַר with a feminine singular referent might lack feminine morphology, it was construed as grammatically feminine. Yet, this is not an insurmountable difficulty for the proposal, as several BH lexemes that lack feminine morphology and normally trigger masculine agreement can receive feminine morphosyntactic treatment with feminine referents, e.g., דִּב ‘bear’ (2 Kgs 2.24; Isa. 11.17), גָּמָל ‘camel’ (Gen. 32.16), בָּקָר ‘cattle’ (Gen. 33.13; Job 1.14). Cf. also the use of the morphologically masculine plural אֱלֹהִים ‘gods’ for the feminine singular referent עֲשֹׁתֶרֶת ‘Ashtoret’ (1 Kgs 11.5) (JM §§134c–d). Thus, morphosyntactic feminine agreement does not fatally contradict the hypothesis that נֶעַר may once have been gender neutral.

Potential counterevidence of a different sort is the existence of unequivocal feminine plural forms alongside allegedly epicene נֶעַר. While written נֶעַר seems to serve for both genders in the

Torah when the referent is singular, with just one exceptional case of written נערה, arguable support for early gender distinction may be seen in the occurrence of gender-distinct plural forms in the Torah. The apparent gender-flexible character of masculine plural נערים, with both generic (Exod. 10.9) and strictly masculine (Gen. 14.24; 22.3, 5, 19; 25.27; 48.16; Exod. 24.5; Num. 22.22) referents, is unsurprisingly. More significant is the feminine plural—does not feminine plural נָעֲרוֹת presuppose the existence of a corresponding dedicated feminine singular נַעֲרָה? Conspicuously glaring in this connection is the use of feminine plural נָעֲרוֹת in Gen. 24.61, in a passage including five cases of consonantal נער with feminine singular reference; see also Exod. 2.5. Could semantics be a determining factor? The dedicated feminine plural form in Gen. 24.61 has the secondary meaning ‘female servants’, in contrast to the preceding feminine singular forms, which have the more basic sense of ‘young woman’. The same sense of female servant also applies to the only other feminine plural form in the Torah, at Exod. 2.5. These few cases are intriguing, but ultimately insufficient as evidence. One can only speculate that early epicene נער-נער secondarily developed feminine plural נָעֲרוֹת, from which, in turn, dedicated feminine singular נַעֲרָה was possibly back-formed.

3.0. Interpreting the Data

Whether נער with feminine singular referent is best interpreted as an orthographic or linguistic phenomenon, the distinction between the CBH of the Torah, with נער, and the CBH of the Prophets and Writings, with נַעֲרָה, demands an explanation. Perhaps the

most straightforward argument would centre on the antiquity of the Patriarchal and Mosaic traditions. Notwithstanding the composite nature of the extant Torah (as represented in various Hebrew traditions and ancient translations) and the date it reached its basic formation, the content in some fashion reflects pre-monarchic times. It is not too farfetched to hypothesise that the language, too, might preserve pre-monarchic features.

Several pertinent considerations must be mentioned. First, while such a view is not necessarily at odds with the still-influential Graf-Wellhausen and similar source-critical approaches, it obviously must engage with them, especially with claims that large sections of the Torah were written in the exilic or post-exilic period. Crucial as evidence in this regard is the linguistic contrast between acknowledged post-exilic Hebrew material and all purported Pentateuchal sources. Persian and Hellenistic Period writings consistently exhibit concentrations of diagnostically late linguistic features uncharacteristic of any part of the Pentateuch, where the language, despite a degree of diversity, is thoroughly classical.

On the other hand, the chronolect of the Pentateuch is by and large the same as that of the CBH Prophets and Writings. According to a simple view of biblical historiography, this is to be expected for the books of Joshua and Judges, which also purport to recount pre-monarchic history, and perhaps also for Samuel, which deals with the origins of the monarchy, but one might expect the obvious emergence of a later chronolect or sub-chronolect in Kings and the pre-exilic Latter Prophets, much of which material deals with the period of the divided monarchy.

While the preservation of old language as part of ancient traditions may be a decisive factor in the subdivision of CBH into earlier and later substrata, it is inadequate to explain both the extensive diachronic similarity of all CBH material and the distribution of the specific linguistic features examined in the present monograph, which sometimes extend beyond the confines of the Pentateuch (e.g., certain features of the pre-monarchic onomasticon), but often exhibit patterns that clearly distinguish the Pentateuch from the rest of CBH.

As in other cases, perhaps the best approach is to interpret the extant evidence as a combination of both primary ancient features and secondary developments. According to one version of such an approach, CBH sources in general—Torah, Prophets, and Writings—may once have been more widely characterised by cases of נער with feminine singular referent, perhaps alongside more innovative נערה, and in the course of compilation, redaction, and/or transmission during the Second Temple period or thereafter, cases of נער with feminine singular referent in the CBH Prophets and Writings were standardised in line with contemporary, i.e., post-exilic, conventions. Due to its early consolidation and revered status, the Torah, by contrast, largely escaped the secondary levelling processes applied to the rest of CBH. This does not preclude the possibility of the late addition of brief insertions to the CBH corpus. If material was added to CBH material—Torah, Prophets, or Writings—these would likely have been adapted to the prevailing norms of the section in question—נער in the Torah, נערה elsewhere. Against this, the difficulty of

successful late imitation of classical style, even in short additions, should not be ignored (see above, Introduction, §5.0).